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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000808

SIPDIS

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E.O. 1298: DECL: 09/21/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [BO](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA ON LUKASHENKO'S MIND

REF: A. 06 MINSK 261

[1](#)B. 06 MINSK 224

[1](#)C. MINSK 678

[1](#)D. 06 MINSK 574

[1](#)E. 06 MINSK 1234

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d.

Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) During a visit by Georgia's Minister of Defense to Minsk, Lukashenko said he wanted to make relations between the two countries "better than during the Soviet Union." While Georgian officials mostly focused on trade in public statements, the GOB most likely sought to signal independence from Russia and the possibility of closer relations with GUAM countries in general. Personal financial interests of those in Lukashenko's inner circle as a motivation for the meeting cannot be excluded. Whatever the primary motive, Lukashenko again demonstrated the willingness to expand economic relations with any country willing to ignore, if only temporarily, Belarus' abysmal human rights record. End summary.

Wish I was Back in the USSR - Belarusian-Georgian Relations

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[1](#)2. (U) On September 17, Georgia's Minister of the Interior, Vano Merabishvili, met with Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Minister of the Interior Vladimir Naumov in Minsk. Lukashenko told Merabisvili that "we are set on establishing good relations with Georgia and making them better than during the Soviet Union." The Belarusian MFA reported on September 19 that David Kotaria, Georgia's Charge, was staying in Minsk to find a location to reopen the Georgian Embassy. The public rapprochement flies in the face of outlandish accusations from Belarusian authorities during and after the 2006 presidential election campaign that Georgian officials supported coup attempts in Minsk (refs A and B).

Take Me to Your Batka's Farm Goods

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[1](#)3. (U) Public comments from Merabishvili touched upon the need to improve trade relations. The head of Georgia's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Giga Bokeria, confirmed to Belarusian independent media that Georgia sought to import Belarusian agricultural goods. He added that "we support the right of the Belarusian people to elect their government freely." He noted, however, that Tbilisi would back Belarus in face of aggression from Russia. (Comment: We do not know what the Belarusians said

in response to this, but we know the GOB is not averse to poking the occasional stick in Moscow's eye. End comment.)

#### Agriculture not the Primary Concern for Lukashenko

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¶4. (C) Vyacheslav Poznyak, Director of the Wider Europe Project, identified three possible motives for Lukashenko to welcome renewed good relations with Georgia. First, the move could represent a symbolic gesture to demonstrate Belarus' independence and lack of adherence to Russia's political views. Second, in the wake of Belarus' increased cooperation with Azerbaijan, GUAM could have some interest for Minsk (Note: MVD officers from GUAM countries came to Minsk to study at the Belarusian MVD's Anti-TIP Academy on July 31 (ref C). End note.) Finally, he did not discount economic interests, although Poznyak believed that the private business interests of Lukashenko or his entourage would more likely explain the desire for closer ties. (Note: Minsk never responded to calls from Moscow in 2006 to ban lucrative imports of Georgian wine and bottled water (ref D), both of which are widely available here. End note.)

#### Comment: Diversification Means Not Leaving the West Behind

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¶5. (C) Minsk's multi-vectored foreign policy focuses first and foremost on building relations with anti-Western countries (ref E). At the same time, the GOB also seems content to build relationships with U.S. partners, such as India and now Georgia, that show a willingness to pursue a relationship based predominantly on economic and/or security concerns. It is only natural that Georgia eventually end its status as the only former Soviet state without a diplomatic presence in Minsk, especially as the GOB asserts its